

Freeman Investigations

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Summary: In the New Mexico night, it's one man's job to bring down the bad guys, protect the innocents, and save the town of Black Mesa from a threat that could destroy everything he holds dear - and that man is Gordon Freeman, Private Eye.

1. Chapter 1

They call this place Black Mesa, but the name doesn't do the darkness justice - there's a dark underbelly to this village of boffins, toughs, and suits that goes way deeper than the miles-deep, Bond-villain worthy setup they have the gall to call a "research facility." And, between you and me, I've seen the Mesa, and it's all brown and tan. Talk about false advertising.

We're in a desert town. If you've never been in a desert at night, count yourself lucky - most of the creepy-crawlies sleep during the day, and wait 'til the sun has its back turned before getting down to the dirty work. The night brings warm-blooded folks out of the frying pan and into the cold fire, turns this shrine to learning into a pit of felony, injustice and sin. I committed a dozen crimes by proxy a day and was none the wiser, and all in the name of science.

After the debacle back in May of '0X, I decided I couldn't take it anymore. I quit the theoretical physics business, struck out on my own. The name's Gordon Freeman, of Freeman Investigations. Private Eye, defender of the innocent, yadda yadda yadda.

I take one last swig from my flask before I start closing up for the night. I don't really have a drinking problem, so much as a drinking solution to a financial problem. Working for the glorified defense contractors at Black Mesa is about as lucrative as you'd expect with the financial state of the government these days, but it came with room and board - At present, all I have to my name is an office, a doghouse-sized apartment in the converted barracks from when this place was a Cold War missile base, the clothes on my back, and my dignity - the last being better than what most of my old friends at

the facility have.

As I shut down my computer (let it never be said I don't move with the times), I was interrupted by a knock on my door. I didn't even bother saying "Who could that be at this hour?" - I've never exactly been one for excessive talk. I just opened the door and let in the caller.

I was surprised. The girl - she was much too young to be anything other than a "girl" - looked like she had been through a warzone. She looked like a serious runner. She carried herself like one (looking much taller than she was), had the right build, wore a tattered jacket, faded jeans and a sweater about a half-dozen sizes too small that barely went past her ribcage, and probably played hell with her breathing. I just had to look in shame and pity. No, really, I maintain it was shame and pity.

The girl, meanwhile, was examining my office, looking over the room before raising her eyebrows visibly when she saw the crowbar.

Teddy Roosevelt said to speak softly and carry a big stick, and I've learned to trust the judgement of anyone with his hundred-meter smiling effigy carved into a rock face. To wit, I swiped a crowbar from the old facility, with the help of an old janitor friend of mine, and considered it the retirement present I never got. Sixteen inches of dark red steel. It opens, it smashes, it intimidates, and on one memorable occasion it helped win a bet on the World Series. The jury's still out on how it compares to a pension.

The girl took my hand, holding it considerably tighter than was strictly necessary, and shook it quickly. "Dr. Freeman? I'm Alyx Vance."

Vance?, I muttered to myself. I knew the name, but I was having trouble placing it until she supplied "My father worked with you back at Black Mesa - I'm not sure you remember me, though."

Eli Vance had been an old buddy of my teacher and immediate superior Izzy Kleiner. He was always struck me as a sentimental, family man - happily married, dozens of friends, and, now that I thought of it, a daughter, who he of course doted on as much as a top-secret theoretical physicist could. In fact, I still probably had the baby pictures he had sent out to his mile-long Christmas list somewhere.

The girl regarded me, and smiled sheepishly. "Man of few words, aren't you?" I shrugged, half smiling. She stifled a laugh.

I judged we had been civil enough, and that it was getting late. I went to my desk, sat down, got out a pad of paper from my pocket, and motioned for her to talk.

"Oh, um." She collected herself. "Dr. Kleiner told me to come here - he's got some strange instructions for a mineral analysis he's doing next week. He said to show you this." She produced a sheaf of papers from...well, under her sweater. I shot her a look, but took it wordlessly.

An experimental procedure, from Black Mesa Research Facility letterhead. Dated yesterday, it called for "Standard analysis of a

non-standard sample" and "105% capacity of anti-mass spectrometer, due to abnormally high purity of sample". I gasped - the wording was familiar. This exact same order had been given to me once before - and it had been the last straw, making me walk out on everyone there, practically on the spot.

I glanced the day of the scheduled procedure - Friday, May 16th. _The same day? That can't be a coincidence_, I thought. I looked at Vance's kid pointedly, and tapped the calendar, turning it over to the coming Friday.

She didn't see the connection. "The test is barely a week from now, I know, but Dr. Kleiner said you have a way with getting things done fast. Do you think you can do it?" I nodded, but held up a hand and began rooting through my files. It didn't take long to find what I was looking for; a curling sheet of paper, slightly stained, and identical to the one Little Miss Vance had handed me but for the year, and "INCIDENT" scrawled on it in an untidy hand - mine, from years ago.

I still remember the damn test, but I didn't want to bring it up. Time hadn't healed that years-old wound, and I've never been a coward, but I didn't want to rub salt on it. So, in silence, I placed the two sheets of paper side by side, facing her.

The girl's eyes widened, showing a scar on her brow that I hadn't noticed. "Oh my god. This was the Incident?"

I nodded gravely.

"But that would mean someone's trying to do it again! This is gonna be huge. You need to do this!"

My only response was to roll my eyes at the melodrama, and hold out my hand.

"What...oh! Right, right, Dr. Kleiner says he'll be able to pay you." The girl took an envelope - from her jacket pocket, mercifully - and held it out. I took it, with a bow - who says chivalry is dead?

After she bid her speedy goodbye, her eye still on the crowbar all the while, I decided to start right away. Not much else I was planning to do with my night. I got my crowbar, put on my overcoat and hat - the night is cold and unfeeling in more ways than one out in the desert - and set out.

A theoretical physicist's work is never done. Since going private, I will say that I'd take walking the streets over tinkering with the properties of subatomic particles any day. You get much more satisfaction - seeing yourself make a difference, with visible effects on people - than from finding the integer-spin value of a fermion.

Still, though, I have my regrets, usually around dinnertime. All that job satisfaction still didn't put food on my table. In fact, I was feeling pretty hungry right now. I decided to head over to Dr. Kleiner's place myself, for two reasons. Firstly, he was probably expecting me to come over, or he would have come over and paid me in person instead of sending over Vance's kid. And secondly, Kleiner is

the best cook this side of the Four Corners a man could hope to meet.

2. Chapter 2

Dr. Kleiner, one of the Facility's more senior and respected scientists, lived in the Level 1 Dormitories. Back when I worked there, I was shoved into a little motel-room sized deal down in Level 3 - I couldn't recall going up to the higher and more cushy levels.

I thanked the good Lord, by proxy of His loyal followers the US government, for still never having spared the time or money to upgrade the facility's aging technology - my years-old employee pass was nothing but a laminated name tag, and with it I was waved into the dormitories without a fuss.

I navigated the rabbit-warren of drab signs and tile floors until I found a nondescript door with a simple deadbolt, unadorned but for a faded metallic bar on the frame and a card reading "198 - KLEINER". I knocked, and Dr. Kleiner answered the door. He was a slight man - tall and thin, bald, Coke-bottle specs, every inch the egghead scientist he was. And I loved him for it.

"Ah, Gordon! You're, er, rather late, I'm afraid. Come in, come in, get yourself something to eat!" I hung up my coat, sighed in the warmth, and, registering what he had said, gave him a quizzical look. _Late?_ Dr. Kleiner smiled. "This is Dr. Magnusson's returning party, of course - or didn't Alyx tell you?" In response, a gravelly but chipper voice came from another room. "What was that about Alyx, now?"

Dr. Eli Vance was an old, bearded black man, with a permanent smile to his features. "Ah, Gordon Freeman!" He said, happily. "Nice to see you again, son." He shook my hand warmly, patting me on the shoulder as he did so. I had to respect Eli like that - he did the whole Ward Cleaver thing without even thinking, he was that kind of guy. I smiled, and it was genuine.

Kleiner smiled, too - Eli and him went way back. "Oh, I sent Alyx over to Gordon's office a few hours ago, with Gordon's invitation. I thought Dr. Magnusson's return to the facility proper would warrant asking after a few old friends." At my motions to continue, he said, "Right, my apologies, er, Gordon. You see, since..." He paused, muttering slightly. "Since around the time you left us, as a matter of fact, my old colleague Dr. Magnusson has been abroad, on an extended research sabbatical. All top secret, of course, but he has, at last, returned; and I felt that it merited a celebration."

He finished this pretty lamely, but then led me to large room, looking sparse but comfy, where I saw about a half-dozen or so people in conversation over plates of food, a mix of familiar and unfamiliar faces. They were all, presumably, scientists and co-workers of this Dr. Magnusson. The name rung a bell, but I wasn't sure who was the guest of honor.

Eli and Kleiner went back to talking, meaning I was the only one not talking to someone else. I've never been the small-talk type, and I didn't want to intrude, so I grabbed a plate, shoveled a bit of

whatever I could recognize on it, and retreated to a quiet room in the back to think.

As I munched on some excellent beef casserole, I thought about the ramifications of someone trying to make the Incident happen again. It wasn't going to be a can of worms, it was going to be a can of sandworms, sans a Kwisatz Haderach to keep them in line.

Come to think of it, forget that metaphor. I'd rather not think about how literal it might be.

The big question, though, was one of motive. Who could benefit from...whatever was going to happen? My first thought was that someone would try to expose Black Mesa to the general world - blowing the lid off, and almost definitely ending, the top-secret but worthwhile work being done in damn near every scientific field. That probably wasn't going to go anywhere, though. Working at what basically amounts to Area 51 meant I was under more government non-disclosure agreements than you could shake a stick at, and consorting with the conspiracy nuts wouldn't look good to the guys in suits.

A better angle might be the usual movie-villain mad-scientist excuse - "Imagine what we could learn from this! Think of the potential for humanity!" If so, Dr. Kleiner would probably know about it - in fact, I would have pegged him to be first in line for this sort of thing, if I hadn't known what the Incident did to him. He had seen what happened that day, and he knew how bad it could be if that thing got even more out of control than it had.

This was all assuming, of course, that this was even done with malicious intent. Vance the younger, who had probably been in grade-school when the Incident had resulted from what I had thought was a fairly standard sample analysis, might have jumped to that conclusion along with me.

Either way, though, talking to Kleiner would point me the right way. I had come here to talk to him anyway - he was my client at the moment, after all. As I finished the last few scraps on my plate, I mulled over how exactly to phrase the question - sitting someone down and saying "Someone's trying to recreate the most traumatic experience of your life, could you give me any idea who?" probably wouldn't get me very far.

I was interrupted, though, when someone entered the room and turned the dimmer up to its brightest, making me squint for a few seconds. As I blinked in the light, I sized him up - or, as it happened, her.

She was the type of lady who I could tell would probably blow this case wide open - and maybe a few other things too. A redhead, with far too much makeup and a bun of hair that, far from appearing serious and dignified, just made her look like Captain Janeway. She wore a tight knit sweater, and evidently, not much else. It took me a couple of seconds to root through my mental reference section and match her face to a name; Dr. Judith Mossman.

Mossman was a quite few years my senior, but when an associate researcher position opened up at Black Mesa, I got the job thanks to a good word from Dr. Kleiner and all my work on entanglement at the

University of Innsbruck. She hadn't been very well disposed toward some upstart kid who had stolen her position at Black Mesa among the giants of the field out from under her, but she had warmed up to me ever since I specifically requested she get the job when I left in the fallout of the Incident.

She rushed up to me, wringing her hands theatrically. "Gordon Freeman?" I nodded. "Oh, thank god - I've been looking for you for..." she trailed off, and took a deep breath, clasping her hand to her chest in case I didn't get the message. I didn't even consider it - after being a detective for any length of time at all, seeing through the honey-trap routine becomes about as natural a reflex as not falling over when you walk. "I've heard about the experiment Friday, I've heard about Isaac, and I think he's overreacting, going out and getting a consultant on this situation."

I shot her a look, throwing her off a bit. "Oh, um, no offense meant, of course, but this experiment is really nothing to be worried about." Her voice dropped, more level now. "What happened last time was totally unpredictable - which is why we're repeating the experiment. You >are a scientist, Doctor - what we're doing is corroboration - one of the fundamental tenets of the scientific method!"<p>

It was a pretty amateur performance. Mossman, I assumed, was under someone's orders to throw me off the scent - and she had had nothing better to draw on for persuasive techniques than Bond movies. It was a surprisingly common tactic in my line of work - it's like no one watches these movies past the second act. Personally, I blame the Internet eroding our attention spans.

In these situations, I usually take up Occam's well-used but sharp razor. Mossman wasn't, by my estimation of her, someone who could easily be strong-armed. Oh, the old adage that everyone's hiding something is true enough, but anyone who would go to the trouble of digging up dirt on Mossman would have much better catpaws to work with.

So she was doing it of her own accord, which narrowed the field considerably. The most likely suspect, in my mind? Dr. Wallace Breen. My old boss, incumbent Administrator of the facility, with the mind of a chess master and the people skills of a politician. Being the head of a shadowy science company with government officials in his pocket, he would have been the very picture of supervillainy, had he not confounded expectations by not actually doing anything really evil - I had had my suspicions about the Incident, but after years of a profound lack of world landmark destruction or womanizing secret agent torture on Dr. Breen's part, I was willing to accept that the consequences were honestly unforeseen, though it didn't change my gut feelings.

Mossman had buttered up to Breen straightaway, even outright flirting during the short time I had seen the two together. I couldn't really see her as the Rosa Klebb to her Blofeld - she didn't have enough initiative. But she could easily have been a proxy, which meant that checking on Breen would be a profitable avenue of investigation.

Breen would obviously know about Friday's looming experiment - in fact, he had probably given the okay himself. He could easily be

thinking of the previously mentioned potential for humanity - he was a starry-eyed idealist deep down, and might well have twisted his secondhand experience of the Incident, in his mind, into a good thing.

My train of thought was interrupted by Mossman, who was looking at me with what she probably thought resembled genuine concern. "Are you okay, Dr. Freeman? You feeling well?" I waved a hand, noncommittally. "If you're not feeling well, then you should really stop your investigations, Doctor. I'm thinking about your well-being!"

I raised a hand to stop her performance, which I would award maybe a 3 or 4 out of 10. I nodded, shook her hand in thanks, and in return she rushed me out of Dr. Kleiner's quarters without so much as letting me say goodbye, then darting out of sight at the first opportunity. Around literally the next corner, someone almost hit me going the other way - Alyx Vance.

"Dr. Freeman?", she asked. I grunted in the affirmative. "Was... was that Dr. Mossman?" Another grunt, and she laughed.

"I shouldn't be talking about her behind her back, but, heh, I didn't want to show up to Dr. Kleiner's party when I heard she'd be there." she said. I smiled, inclining my head to her, and she grinned and got a faraway look in her eyes, remembering something

"My dad says that she's really ambitious, but sucking up to the boss doesn't make you evil..." she chuckled. "Not in those, uh, exact words, of course..." she trailed off for a few seconds before changing the subject.

"Anyway, how's your detection going?" She said, eagerly. "What have you got so far? Is Dr. Mossman in on it?"

I took a belt from my flask, as I debated with myself whether to trust her with my suspicions, and decided against it. She was still a teenager, and as a rule I don't trust them. Nothing against them as people; I've met quite a few fine and upstanding members of society who weren't old enough to vote, but... they just don't have the kind of real world experience that you need to keep your head above water, and I try to leave them out of my work and hope they reciprocate.

I put my finger to my mouth closing my eyes and trying to look fatherly. "Awww!" she moaned. "C'mon, you can tell me!"

I shook my head firmly, and looked at her pointedly before tapping my watch. Alyx said "Oh, come on, don't be like that! I can make decisions for myself - Dr. Kleiner trusts me! He trusted you, back when he was your teacher! Why don't you trust me?"

I had to respect the kid for that - she had found my buttons, and knew when to press them to boot. I decided to throw her a bone. Besides, this meant she owed me a favor - and a favor from a free radical like this wouldn't go amiss in a pinch. So I closed my eyes, nodded, and beckoned her.

"Thanks so much, Doctor. So, what can you..." I held up a hand to stop her. If I was going to bring a kid along, I was going to get some protection. And if there was one man I knew who would give me protection, it was my old drinking buddy Barney Calhoun.

3. Chapter 3

I had known Lieutenant Barney Calhoun since the plane ride out to Black Mesa. When I had met him, he was a just a college dropout from Phoenix who wanted nothing more than the nice, sedentary job of guarding a gaggle of eggheads in the middle of the desert. He wasn't even old enough to drink back then - not that that had stopped him. He took to liquor like a duck to water, and after over a decade of steady marination and high heat, Barney was cooked to perfection. He had gone up in the world, got himself a cushy desk job as the head of Blue Shift, commanding one-third of the Black Mesa Security Force, the highest physical and legal power for miles around. As the only licensed investigator at Black Mesa, he called me in so often on a consultant basis that he was practically my boss. He had promised me an official posting for a couple years now, but the bureaucrats still hadn't lifted a finger in that respect. Typical.

Vance the younger split after I promised to let her in on my investigations, on the condition that she keep a civil tongue in her head around me, stay in school (she was on her Easter break, but I felt it was good advice regardless) and keep better sleeping hours than me.

Speaking of my bad sleep cycle, I didn't even bother trying to call Barney by the time my phone got any decent reception. I decided to forget it, send him a text and hope he had gotten back to me in the morning.

NEED TO MEET W/YOU ASAP - WHAT TIME IS OK?
>-GORDON
PS: BEER ON ME

Barney was a true friend, but I thought it would be prudent to give him some incentive.

I went back to my office to do some serious legwork. Nine times out of ten, real sleuthing isn't so much meeting colorful characters, finding intriguing clues and making brilliant deductions; so much as it is just sitting down and slogging through gouts of paperwork.

As I locked up my office door for the night, I checked my watch - it was past 2 in the morning. I'd pulled more than my share of all-nighters, and so decided to get some of my thoughts down before I turned in. The last thing I remember doing that night, though, is sitting down on my desk, and deciding to close my eyes for a minute. The past few hours might have been fine for me ten years ago, but time makes fools of us all, and these days I needed to go to sleep much earlier.

I didn't have bad dreams that night, just strange dreams - the same dreams I had been having increasingly for weeks. It wasn't really a coherent scenario as much as a sort of slideshow of weird locales - a barn overlooking a ditch, a cobblestoned town square covered in leaves and old posters, a huge, dark, triangular tube covered in translucent pipes, a bridge by a fountain where rocking horse people eat marshmallow pies. You get the idea.

I knew the second I woke up that I had seen something important in the dream, and needed to get it down onto something before I forgot

all about it. I looked around for a piece of paper, and scribbled a hasty sketch of a person.

He looked sort of like a caricature of a generic authority figure - dark suit, wrinkled, graying hair, smiling widely. There was something off, though. Maybe the face was too tall or too squared, or the eyes too wide, or the pose too statuesque. That was the man's defining characteristic - he was just inhuman enough to give you the willies. I had seen him before - years ago, or maybe it was yesterday. He was there at the Incident, he was behind this. He was important. I needed to have this on hand. I put it...

...wait, where did I put it?

And what was I looking for? A note, or something. Ugh, forget it. This is what my mind is like in the morning - I hadn't even had breakfast yet.

Oh well - the joys of working from home. I got out my hot-plate and started boiling an egg, and thinking about the case. I remembered that I had contacted Barney last night, and checked my messages.

SEE ME LUNCH

>12 NOON, BIG TONY
OUTSIDE FOOD OK ;D

>-B<p>

It was almost 10:30 in the morning - I had to hurry. I shoveled the soft-boiled egg onto some half-done toast, ate it in two bites, and grabbed my coat as I went out the door. I was taking a quick detour to the local liquor store to get a few bottles of ale for Barney - in a perfect world, I wouldn't be on first-name terms with the owner, but you can't have everything.

After the quick stop, I took a shuttle bus to the visitor's entrance to the facility. Barney knew full well that I had been sneaking around the facility with my old employee pass for going on a decade, and let it slide in the name of greater justice - but he still preferred more aboveboard meeting places.

After getting a visitor's pass, I went to the nearby employee cafeteria. Rule of thumb: Get a bunch of smart people together in one place, and things will get hairy fast if you don't have large amounts of grease, salt, and sugar-based nourishment on hand. There were probably enough vending machines in the rabbit-warren corridors of Black Mesa to form a union, and the cafeteria got more funding than the old anomalous materials division where I used to work did - no lie, I've seen the budget.

The money, at least, was well spent. I wandered over to Big Tony's Pizza - one of three pizza places in the cafeteria, and probably the best. Barney was seated in a booth, greeting me with a shout and a gesture toward two steaming slices of mushroom pizza - my favorite.

I smiled, patting Barney on the shoulder and sitting opposite him, taking a bite of a slice of pizza. Chewy, delicious, and tongue-scalding - just the way I liked it. I gulped down a paper cup of water to cool my mouth off, as Barney asked, "So, Gordon, what's up?"

In response, I held up a hand before rifling through my coat. I still had the tightly folded experimental orders, which I fished out of my pocket and wordless. I unfolded both of them, and slid them over so he could see them, pointing to the dates and raising my eyebrows.

Barney was tacit. He stared at the papers for a long while, before muttering "Friday." I removed a strand of cheese from my mouth and nodded, imploringly. Barney bit his lip.

"Okay, let me guess. You're on a case, trying to find out who's behind this." I laughed, and got a bottle of beer out from my bag, handing it to him with a smile. Barney took it, tugging it open expertly on the side of the table. "I'll take that as a yes, then." He said, with a trace of a chuckle. He took a long sip from the bottle, then sighed. "What do want me to do for you? I haven't heard about this, these things are always need-to-know..."

I stopped him, and, after scanning the document laid out in front of me, I pointed at a section of the letterhead at the top of the front page. "Dr. Wallace Breen, Administrator". I gave Barney a look, as he leaned forward to see what I was showing him..

Barney understood. "You wanna see Breen? " I nodded, and indicated my watch.

"Sorry, Gordon, I don't think he's free until... ah, Thursday. Cutting it close - is that good enough, you think?"

I sighed, but nodded.

"So, what you been up to, lately?" Barney said warmly. "We never get to talk these days." I was happy to, but before I could say a thing, a familiar voice called out. "Gordon?"

I looked into the throng for a while, before one figure stood out from the lab-coated mass - Alyx Vance, a visitor's pass identical to mine pinned to her jacket. She maneuvered toward my table, and noticed Barney. "Barney?", she asked, confused.

"Well, hello Alyx!" Barney said. " What brings you 'round here?"

>Alyx's reply was a bit too well-prepared to seem genuine to me. "Oh, Dad let me come see what he was working on - I didn't have much else to do."<p>

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, fine." Alyx said, giggling. "I swiped an old visitor pass from my father and went here." I frowned at her, chastising. "Don't worry about me! I've been here a few times before; I can't go any of the really important places. I'll be fine!"

"Alyx, don't remind me how easy it is for teenagers to get through our security system." Barney's response was surprisingly sardonic for him - I approved.

"I'm the head of Blue Shift, remember? I'm still on duty - I don't know what you're up to here."

Alyx was indignant. "Come on!" Barney shot back in his professional voice, trying to cover for himself. "I'll let you slide this time,

but I don't want to have to catch you again - got that?"

She sighed theatrically, but acquiesced.

Barney looked at me for help. "Can you, uh, see her out, Gordon?" I nodded. "Great, great, thanks. I'll send you the time you can see Breen soon - I gotta back on my shift." I made a gesture of understanding as Barney stood up wiped off his vest, and I beckoned Little Miss Vance.

She followed me, arms crossed and lip curled, as I took her out of the visitor's center. As we passed through the security checkpoint, I gave her a questioning look. The kid groaned and shook her head, then sighed. "Look, I... I just don't know why I came here, okay? I sort of... I sort of..." She grabbed her head. "Dammit! I just... I can't put it into words! Don't make me say it out loud!"

I knew I had hit a nerve there - something to think about. Now, when I was her age, I was mightily insecure, sure, but even by those standards she seemed to be overreacting. I decided to stay out of her head. I like to think I have some respect for privacy, even after the decade or so of professional snooping, delving and interfering I have under my belt.

4. Chapter 4

I knew the second I woke up that I had seen something important in the dream, and needed to get it down onto something before I forgot all about it. I looked around for a piece of paper, and scribbled a hasty sketch of a person.

He looked sort of like a caricature of a generic authority figure - dark suit, wrinkled, graying hair, smiling widely. There was something off, though. Maybe the face was too tall or too squared, or the eyes too wide, or the pose too statuesque. That was the man's defining characteristic - he was just inhuman enough to give you the willies. I had seen him before - years ago, or maybe it was yesterday. He was there at the Incident, he was behind this. He was important. I needed to have this on hand. I put it into my desk's top drawer, and saw a huge pile of papers - all sketches, of the same man. I jumped out of my chair, scattering a couple dozen of the who-knows-how-many papers on the floor. Oh, God, what could this...

What could this...

This...

This mess needed to be cleaned up, I thought as I stared at the pile of old, scribbled-on stationary. Ugh, forget it. I was too tired to sort through stacks of papers with my mind like this - I hadn't even had breakfast yet.

I went to the kitchen, and, over eggs on toast, plotted out my day. It was Thursday, May 15th. I had my appointment with my old boss today, in... just a few hours, as Barney's note had revealed. I had some time, then, to sit down and work out a game plan for talking with Dr. Breen.

This is the sort of time when a man turns to his "What would Bond do?" bracelet. Breen, as I've said, is barely a white cat's hairsbreadth from going all-out megalomaniacal, and though I haven't had much occasion to learn, it would be a safe bet that he shared the weaknesses along with the strengths.

I was really getting into the spirit of this - I didn't have a map of the Mesa's Administration offices, but I had a feeling I could easily sneak past Breen's retinue through the air ducts - when you're a couple hundred meters underground, you need all the ventilation you can get, and I knew from extensive experience that the facility's vents could comfortably fit someone about my size and then some. It's practically an extreme sport; the wind in your face, steering by service lights and a map in your head, half your senses stifled and the other half overwhelmed.

Ironically, it was as I was planning to break into Breen's office when I heard a muffled noise from outside mine. I jumped, and listened closely - footsteps, light but audible. I got my crowbar down, and raised it as I flung open my door, to see...

Little Miss Vance. Who else?

I grabbed her by the shoulder, as she froze in fear. She gasped out an expletive, as I walked her into my office, locked the door, and indicated her to sit down. She did so, trembling slightly as she did. Calm as can be, I sat on the other side of the desk, I drummed my hand on the hardwood, and gave her one of my angrier looks.

Alyx was simply speechless - she buried her head in her arms and cried, softly. "D-don't! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Dr. F-freeman..." I bit my lip - she was probably playing her anguish up for sympathy, but I was willing to give her, to some extent, the benefit of the doubt.

I walked over to her side, and took her wrist, looking at her hands. She had some of that runner tape stuff on her palms, but her fingers were raw and cut in several places. In response, Vance paused between anguished breaths to explain.

"Your window... I broke in... I'm sorry..." She trailed off. _Your speech... fragmented sentences... faking it... trying for pity._ I was willing, though, to show her some compassion. I gestured for Alyx to stay, and went out to my solitary full-sized window, which was indeed open, with chinks on the sill and the screen shoved aside. I also went to my closet, getting a first-aid kit that I had kept there - getting . I brought it back into the office, where she was messing with her jacket. She regarded the little green box warily, but held out her hands at my instruction after I took out some bandages and dabbed them in some bright green goo from a tub, then wrapped it around her fingers. As she stretched and wiggled them to get them comfortable, I sat back down and simply shook my head, looking down and sighing. Theatric, I know, but I was disappointed in her, and I didn't feel like shouting.

Vance started squirming, grimacing as I stayed, moving my head back and forth rhythmically. After I judged she had had enough, I finally looked up, and bade her out. She scampered out of my apartment, taking care to close the door as quietly as she could.

I looked around - I was going to have to leave soon. I wouldn't want to keep Dr. Breen waiting. I collected a few odds and ends from my desk, and went to get my coat. I almost slipped and fell on a solitary piece of paper on the floor - some trifle or other that had fallen from my desk. I stuffed it in my pocket - it was blighting the otherwise bare floor. Feng shui and all that, and though I suppose it is technically a bachelor apartment, I still try to keep up appearances.

I didn't even bother going the official way, taking a maintenance stairwell from ground level down to the admin facilities. I walked down the hallways briskly, with my head down - this was a research center, meaning that almost everyone here had been working at Black Mesa for years on end - especially here, in the upper echelons. I had mostly stayed in the Anomalous Materials divisions when I worked here, but I had somewhere to be, and didn't want to be recognized.

Time to get down to business. I wandered the corridor until I found a janitor's closet. There was an emergency exit diagram on the door, which I had to look over a few times to get the way to Breen's office down on my head. I carefully moved one shelf out of the way, exposing a dull, featureless panel. I tested it - it opened at a tug, seemingly on hinges._ Interesting._ I wet a finger and put it in the vent - the air was totally still. _More so._

Everything seemed to be in order, though, so I stretched out, cracked my neck, turned on a pocket flashlight, and climbed in the vent.

I was surprised to find I didn't need the torch - dirty red light flooded the long metallic tunnel, provided by tiny red bulbs protruding from little alcoves at regular intervals. My guess was that for some reason the vent system had been converted into maintenance ducts. It would certainly be smart, and practical - so something was obviously up.

The tunnels still followed the corridors in predictable patterns as the vents had, and the question wasn't really high priority - as I squinted to check my watch, I saw that I had less than ten minutes before I was supposed to be showing up for Breen. I looked out from the vent openings into the hallway to track my progress. I was nearing Breen's office, now - the floors that were the easiest landmark from directly above had changed from the normal checkered tile to more exclusive green carpeting.

A few turns later, I had to stop; the vent had twisted and turned to, seemingly, nowhere. I inched backwards to the last grate I had passed. The hall below was an empty hall, lined with doors. I had to awkwardly tilt my head to read the nameplate on the door:

DR. WALLACE BREEN, Ph. D

FACILITY ADMINISTRATOR

Paydirt - almost. Dropping from here would be completely pointless - I wanted to make a grand entrance. I turned over in the cramped tunnel as I reached for my flashlight again, and pointed it where the tunnel had abruptly stopped. I noticed a grate there that was obviously newer than the rest of the system, still shining silver in contrast to the dull gray surrounding it.

This was the kind of thing I had been planning for. I reached into my coat, and after a few false starts, managed to extricate my crowbar. I slid it around in front of me, and muscle memory from years of vent-crawling took over. I tapped the edges of the new grate with a finger, delicately searching for any imperfections. After I found none, I sighed, and gave it a hearty whack with the crowbar.

Bad idea - I hadn't done this in years, and the ringing in my ears made me quite dizzy. I heard a few echoing noises of confusion from below, and decided to move, wincing as I forced myself over the (quite sharp) grate.

The next vent opened, happily, right above Dr. Breen's desk. I saw him standing with his back to me, in his open doorway. As I opened the vent cover, I heard him speaking, distraught, to some unseen someone. "I simply don't know, but I'm all but certain it was..." He stopped - I had landed on the floor, with less coordination and more noise than I would have liked. I was rusty, no doubt about it.

I scrambled to my feet, as Breen turned to face me. He even looked the part of the evil CEO - silver hair, goatee, business casual. His veneer broke for a few moments. "What's the meaning of this? Who are you - how did you get in here?"

I had been expecting this, I passed him a business card. I had gotten a few dozen made for a lark, after I got my investigator's license - because what's the point of having both "Ph.D" and "P.I." after your name, if you don't get to show it off? Breen read the card, and suddenly was all charm. "Ah, Dr. Freeman. Delighted to see you again. How long has it been?"

I shook his hand, then took out the now dog-eared experimental orders with a flourish. "What's that?" Breen said, dismissively. "Oh, put it over there." I went to his desk, and gestured to the curling papers, insistent. Breen was aggressively polite - "Make yourself comfortable, Doctor. Would you like something to drink - coffee? Tea? Anything?"

I indicated I wasn't thirsty. "Oh, come now, Doctor. I insist - I'll get you some water." He went into a back room and came back a moment later with a glass, which he all but forced into my hands. I didn't drink it - I wouldn't peg Breen as the sort of person to slip a mickey on someone who hadn't even said what he was here for yet, but it's always good to have a healthy dose of paranoia around people this powerful.

Instead, as a sort of petty retaliation, I took a long draught from my flask while staring at him pointedly, then stood up and shoved the experimental orders at Breen. Making a little smirk, he read them. "Is this why you came to see me, Doctor? A routine mineral analysis, done by your old science team? If you're looking for me to reinstate your employment, I'm afraid you'll..."

I stopped him, and showed him the older order, tapping the prominent "INCIDENT." Breen was about to say something, but I shushed him with a wave of my hands and pointed to his name on the letterhead of both orders, giving him a look.

"Ah. I see. You're worried that this experiment will lead to a

duplication of this... 'incident', as I see you call it?" I nodded pointedly. I was surprised how dismissive he was of this - he had to have known the damage that the Incident had wrought on...well, pretty much everyone and everything I had known about.

Breen was in full speech mode. "Doctor, things have changed at Black Mesa, since you left here. Shortly after you left, you see, I embarked on an extensive renovation initiative. Black Mesa is a safer, better maintained place, Dr. Freeman. We're practically a different institution than the one you left over a decade ago. That... grievous accident you're referring would never be possible in the current testing environment."

Breen talked a good game, but I had seen enough of the facility after I left to know it was a lie - and, like all good lies, it was wrapped around truth. After the damage Black Mesa incurred in the Incident, Breen had taken the opportunity to get lots of cutting-edge testing equipment and a few brand spanking new luxuries as well. The problem was that he didn't know the first thing about theoretical physics. From what I remembered from around the time of the incident, the fault lay not in the equipment but in the actual sample - what happened was a theorized phenomenon called a Resonance Cascade, that occurred when the specially-constructed resonator we had attached to the anti-mass spectrometer... well, I actually don't remember. Sorry, folks, but I haven't needed to use all the jargon for about a decade, and like the saying goes, if you don't use it, you'll lose it.

Come to think of it, I it was a safe bet that it wasn't a lie - Breen had no idea what he was talking about. I thought this made him less dangerous, until he spoke again, sounding grave.

"Doctor, I would be lying if I said I didn't share some of your...apprehension about this. To be frank, I'm not sure I would approve this experiment, given the choice. But this order comes verbatim from the Defense Department, as did the previous one, and I have no real power to stop either. I have to sign off on everything, but I have no real prerogative - you don't understand the politics of this, Doctor!"

And that was when I realized it. He had no conception whatsoever of this - he couldn't have been behind it. He knew about everything that went on in Black Mesa, but he wasn't paying attention to it - he was only trying to advance his power in more conventional ways, instead of death rays or sonic superweapons.

Speaking of, I had noticed a steady, heavy breathing behind me. Trying to do it casually, I turned to the side, and noticed a face darting out of the frosted glass of Dr. Breen's door. I motioned for Breen to excuse me, and in one fluid motion jumped from the chair and opened the door. There was Dr. Judith Mossman, sitting at a secretary's desk and avoiding my gaze. Wordlessly, I took her by the wrist and dragged her back into Breen's office,

Breen was more amused than anything else. "Well spotted, Doctor. You've met Judith, I trust? She did so care for your safety - and I'm glad you took her suggestion to heart, hmm?" Translation: _Wow, you actually fell for that? You're stupider than I thought._ To add insult to injury, he thought I had been outsmarted by his lackey.

I didn't like that idea - but I was trying to ignore that - the

vague, half-formed plans for investigations I had planned out mostly consisted on trying to dig up dirt on Breen. He didn't seem to be behind any of this. I had been sloppy. As much as I might delude myself, I wasn't Sam Spade looking for the Falcon.

I needed to go home and have a real think about this - I had a feeling that if I put all the pieces I had together like a professional, it would put me in the home stretch. I stumbled through the rest of my conversation with Breen, walked my way out of Black Mesa lost in thought, and got on the bus back to my apartment. Wincing in the early-afternoon sunlight, it took me a while to notice that the person sitting next to me was...

Little Miss Vance. Who else?*

5. Chapter 5

Alyx Vance, dammit, it all came back to her. I had been run raw for the better part of a week, and she had been there for practically every moment in it. I wasn't even sure how many times she had run into me from out of nowhere - don't get me wrong, I'm not some curmudgeon who wants everyone under eighteen to be locked up at all times [I probably wouldn't complain if it was made a law, mind], but I still made a mental note to talk to her father Dr. Vance one of these days.

The saying goes "Once is happenstance, twice coincidence, and thrice enemy action." By that count, someone was out to get me more than twice over. And so, after getting the girl out of my hair, I went back to my apartment on the double.

Being the consummate professional, when I got home my first action was to mindlessly surf the internet. Sue me, but sometimes I just feel the need to drop out and bask in the glow of some vitriolic thirty-something expressing their intense distaste at poorly-made fiction. It's not the best coping mechanism, but it's healthier than smoking and cheaper than therapy.

As I read, I got to thinking. Assuming someone was indeed using the girl to get to me, the first question was not one of who but of how. For instance, how did they get Vance on their side? Or, how much does she know about what their plans are?

I didn't want to discount the possibility that Vance herself was behind everything - the moral of about a quarter of all fiction ever produced is "Don't underestimate someone just because they're young/ugly/outwardly stupid/downright unfit for their job." Whatever - it would be nice to have a contingency for it, but I put the possibility on the back burner.

The girl had given me the case in the first place, in fact. Slipped me enough money for a week at my usual rates - I was going to be eating off that for a while. She had told me to find out who was behind tomorrow's experiment, and get them to stop it - the point was stopping it, but that would be made much easier if I knew who was responsible for starting it. If I didn't know that, the easiest course of action would probably be to just up and go to the test chamber and try to interfere in some way...

Now, there was an idea. Come to think of it, it was probably a better move than my previous plan: none. It would be logical to assume that whoever was behind the experiment would, if not show up themselves, at least send an underling along to make sure everything went according to plan - which means they would try to stop me, making it easier to sniff them out. Perfect.

I had to think about this, though - I hadn't been down to the materials testing labs, down in Sector C, since I had worked there. The goings-on down there was double-dog top secret, even for everyone else at Black Mesa - only the Lambda Complex clear at the other end of the base had higher security. The test labs were crawling with armed security guards, retinal scanners, and made you feel like a rat in a maze to boot - the brand new maintenance ducts I had seen were probably bigger than some of the Sector C corridors.

Would getting this done be easy? Probably not.

Would I enjoy it? Definitely.

After some deliberation, I decided to go to Izzy Kleiner for help - he was the one who was paying me for this, after all, and I never got the chance to talk to him after that party I went to. I opened a new tab and started to chat with him - it took him a while to respond.

-YOU THERE?

__-NICE TO HEAR FROM YOU GORDON__

-HEY DR., SORRY ABOUT RUNNING OUT ON YOU ON SATURDAY.

__-DON'T WORRY ABOUT OT GORDON__

__-IT__

-THANK YOU

-I WAS WONDERING

-DO YOU THINK

-COULD YOU GET ME INTO TOMORROW'S EXPERIMENT?

__-THERES AN EXPERINEMT TOMORROW?__

I bit my lip.

-OF COURSE, YOU SENT ALYX VANCE TO TELL ME ABOUT IT

-LAST WEEK

-RIGHT

__-I RECALL NO SUCH THING__

__-I SENT ALYX__

__-TO GIVE YOU AN INVITATION TO TAHT PARTY__

__-WHY WOULD I TELL OU ABOUT ANY EXPERIMENT?__

-DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHAT THE EXPERIMENT IS?

__-I HONESTLY DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WE HAD AN EXPERIMENT__

__-ARE YOU SURE ABOUT IT?__

__-WE USUALLY HEAR ABOUT THIS IN ADVANCE__

-WELL, I WAS SURE UNTIL JUST NOW

-ANYTHING YOU HAVE THAT MIGHT BE AN EXPERIMENTAL ORDER?

__-I CAN CHECK__

__-I CAN NEVER SEEN TO GET MY FILES STRAIGHT__

__-BE BACK SOOON__

I didn't even move, all but bating my breath as stared at the little window on my monitor, the light sending motes of disturbance dancing across my eye, making them water.

After staring at the screen so long I had started to count the individual pixels, they started to change. Dr. Kleiner was back.

__-I THINK I FOUND THAT ORDER__

__-IT WAS IN M SOCK DRAWER__

__-I THINK I REMEMBER PUTTING IT THERE__

-CAN YOU REMEMBER GIVING A COPY TO ALYX VANCE A WEEK
AGO?

__-NO__

__-BUT__

__-I CAN SEE WHY SHE WANTED TO TAKE IT TO YOU__

__-THIS EXPERIMENT MIGH LEAD TO A RESONANCE CASCADE SCENARIO__

__-EVEN WORSE THAN THE ONE WE EXPERIENCED A DECADE AGO__

__-WHO COULD HAVE AUTHORIZED THIS?__

I paused. If Dr. Kleiner hadn't even known about it until now...

__-OH YES__

__-ON A HAPPIER NOTE__

__-I CAN DEFINITELY GET YOU INTO THIS EXPERIMENT__

__-YOU WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN THE LAST ONE, YOU WILL BE A SCIENTIFIC
CONSULTANT__

I ASSUME YOU KNOW WHEN TO ARRIVE?

-OF COURSE

-THANK YOU SO MUCH, DOCTOR

THIS ISN'T JUST FOR YOUR BENEFIT GORDON

I HOPE YOU WILL HELP THE EXPERIMENT PROCEED AS NOMINALLY AS POSSIBLE

****ISAAC KLEINER IS NOW OFFLINE****

I drained my flask, sighed, and packed up a few things. I wanted to be ready for tomorrow - back when I had worked at Black Mesa, I had gotten into trouble a good few times by waking up late...

6. Chapter 6

"And the earth was without form, and void; darkness shrouded the watery deep..."

And a tinny female voice said _"Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system."_

And there was the Black Mesa transit system.

And Dr. Gordon Freeman decided to stop the spirit of his high-school English teacher yelling at him for both using pretentious Biblical quotes and for beginning so many sentences with conjunctions, and opened his eyes.

Even after all the time had been working at Black Mesa, Gordon never got tired of his commute.

That's not to say, though, that he wasn't tired.

"The time is 7:30 AM". Hearing the earliness of the hour over the PA system just made it worse for Gordon, who had always been a late sleeper. As the loudspeakers changed the subject to the weather reports and self-aggrandizing public service messages, Gordon sank deeper into the plastic seat of the tram he was riding, and consoled himself with the dizzying views of the central transit hub.

Gordon tried to nod off again, but was woken up by a ray of sunlight and some indeterminate whirring noise working in tandem to rouse him. He blinked the afterimages from his eyes, grumbling. As the tram lurched to a halt in front of a pressurized, double-locked blast door, Gordon rose, yawned and stretched. He wanted his head clear today - there was a mineral analysis first thing in the morning that, if memory served, was of one of the purest xenium samples Black Mesa had located yet.

Of course, that also meant the most unstable sample - at least, potentially. But this had all been planned long ago, and Gordon would be fine so long as he stuck to standard procedures.

Gordon looked out the window behind him, watching one of the

facility's fleet of automated lifters and loaders plod over to some scattered debris. He smiled faintly at its awkward, halting motions. A much more conventional freight truck whizzed by it at twice the speed, a testament (Gordon chuckled) to futility of needless and spending.

After a while, the tram lurched to a halt to let another tram past, this one carrying a Science Team member along with an older man in a suit. He looked at Gordon's tram, then raised an eyebrow and checked his watch as he passed out of Gordon's sight.

As the tram rounded a corner, Gordon noticed a large, reinforced silo that was making a steady echoing, dripping sound - as he passed it, he saw a huge gash in the silo, and a steady drip from the silo into a small pool of muddy, greenish muck. Another of those lifter-and-loader robots jerked toward the spill - Gordon wondered what exactly it was going to do when it arrived at the murky sludge.

Gordon dimly registered the PA system at this point - "Work safe, work smart. Your future depends on it." He pinched the bridge of his nose, and sighed, sinking into his seat as the PA droned on. "Now arriving: Sector C test labs, and control facilities." Gordon pulled himself up, and sank down into his shoes as he clung on the strap above him and waited as a security guard slowly trudged over to his door. Because he was in a hurry, every second seemed drawn out to minutes...

"Morning, Mr. Freeman!" Gordon knew the guard, but not well - he recalled his name as Jimmy Veeber, or something like that. Gordon smiled and gave him a quick wave, but wasn't sure what to say without addressing him, creating an awkward silence punctuated only by the dissonant clatter of their feet on the grille above the yawning depths of the facility.

Gordon stepped between two huge blast doors, and waited for another age before the one in front of him trundled open. He blinked in the light, then marched off as he nodded to Doug, another security guard acquaintance of his.

"Hey, Mr. Freeman. Got a bunch of messages for you, just now - you should take a look." Gordon circled around to Doug's desk, and watched as the guard drummed his fingers on the desk waiting for the page to load - for a place that had always reminded Gordon of some latter-day James Bond complex, they didn't have very up-to-date technology.

Doug swore under his breath as he uselessly tapped at his keyboard. "Aw, would you believe it? The entire damn system's crashed." Gordon sighed, and shrugged. "Ah, you're right, Gordon. Just one of those days, huh?" Gordon smiled, and was about to reply when Doug cut him off. "Oh yeah, just remembered - there's an experiment this morning. You should get your hazard suit on and head down to the lab."

Gordon assented and bade Doug goodbye. He wandered around for a minute, before his brain woke up and guided him to the locker room. It was fairly commonplace by the clandestine supervillain lair standards of Black Mesa - lockers, bathrooms, benches. Gordon sat down and yawned and adjusted his tie - it was much too early to be doing high-level theoretical physics, but good grooming was easy.

He was brought out of this haze by a scientist on an opposite bench, who was scrubbing something off his shirt. "Why," the scientist asked testily, "do we all have to wear these ridiculous ties?" Gordon tried answering, but the tie-hater barely even noticed he was there.

Gordon strode into the back of the locker room. This was more like it - a starkly lit, white tiled room, which housed a bank of metal-plated adapters opposite three phone booth-sized storage tanks. Two were empty, but the last had an orange-and-black metal plated bodysuit - the Hazardous Environment suit. It was a pain to put on, but Gordon had always enjoyed wearing it - it always gave him a feeling of invincibility, of raw power.

Gordon shuffled off, listening to music in his head, and decided first on the agenda was to get something to eat - he hadn't had any breakfast yet, and even supermen needed their morning joe. He went to a little breakfast nook-cum-breakroom, and got himself a cup.

Lukewarm. Gordon made a face and reached for the microwave. He pressed what he thought was the opening button, but turned out to be 'high power'. Scared, Gordon started mashing buttons until the door clicked open to reveal a foil-covered box, covered in condensation. Gordon rubbed his safety-gloved hands together, and took it out, the suit's protection screening all but a mild warmth from his touch.

The...whatever had been in the container was now unrecognizable. Gordon bit his lip, and tossed the entire affair into the trash. "My God, man, what are you doing?", a nearby scientist asked, staring at him. Gordon shushed him, downed his coffee in one gulp, and walked off, going all the way past 2 security checkpoints and an elevator, never saying a word to the people who occasionally greeted him as he passed.

Finally, Gordon reached the control room. It reminded him of an airplane cockpit, but the view from the windows was of the test chamber. Bright orange, metal-plated walls surrounded a huge contraption that resembled a flashlight above a huge, upended talon - the Anti-Mass Spectrometer.

Though conventional spectrometers were usually the size of a microwave, this one could comfortably fit an eighteen-wheeler - most of the space was taken up by the dampening fields necessary to allow people and objects to interact with the transuranic long-wavelength rays used in the chamber. Gordon had seen blueprints of the chamber before, but this was the real deal - and it looked fairly dingy compared to his vision, which, honestly, included a plinth and manacles.

He looked to the back of the control room, and shook the hand of Dr. Izzy Kleiner, his old mentor and current colleague. "Ah, good to see you - they just sent the sample down." Dr. Kleiner said.

"They're waiting for you, Gordon." This came from a man in one of the control room chairs, who swiveled around to talk to him. "In the test chamber." Gordon nodded, and, after a scientist used the retinal scan to let him in, went into the airlock.

With a hissing noise, Gordon strode into the chamber. He stopped, and winced as a jolt of feedback sounded over the loudspeakers, before a scientist in the control room started speaking. "Testing, testing...everything seems to be in order. Could you climb up and start the rotors?"

Gordon ascended the service ladder to a small catwalk, which held another control board full of nondescript buttons - Gordon probably knew the function of about half of them. Luckily, main power was a clearly labeled, glass-covered, big red button. Gordon resisted the urge to shout "GIVE MY CREATION LIFE, DAMN YOU!", as he pressed it.

Within moments, the huge flashlight-shaped thing began to spin. A steady whine echoed around the huge chamber, starting low but getting higher and higher. After about a minute of spinning, he heard the loudspeaker over the din: "Stage One emitters, activating."

A golden flash, and the center of the huge spectrometer became a cone. Gordon thanked his suit, on behalf of both himself and his future offspring - the radiation in the chamber was now approaching poisonous levels.

"Stage Two emitters, commencing, now." Now the cone was much brighter. Gordon winced in the light.

"Overhead capacitors to 105 percent." As the structure started to spin even faster, Gordon furrowed his brow, activated the suit radio, and shouted, "Hang on - we're boosting it past its peak speed? Why?"

There was a long pause before one of the scientists responded. "Gordon, this was ordered by the administrator. We went to some lengths to get this sample, and he's concerned that we get a conclusive analysis from it."

"Cranking it up to 105 percent won't help - that just makes it faster! Dr. Breen's not a theoretical physicist, what does he know about this?"

The scientist grumbled. "Gordon, work as quickly as you can - the sample is arriving soon, and we're not sure how long the system can operate at this level."

Gordon slapped his palm on the front of his hazard suit's helmet - the closest he could come in his attire. "All the more reason to turn it back down! We're ahead of schedule here - we can afford a minute or two!"

"All right, Gordon," came the eventual reply. "Overhead capacitors, to nominal maximum. And get down to the delivery port - I've just been informed that the sample is ready." Gordon climbed down, after trying and failing to slide down to save time. Stupid inner simian, lying down on the job like that.

Near the foot of the ladder was a small trundle cart, mounted on rails. Gordon noted the mineral sample - a blazing, almost luminescent yellowish crystal, although that could have just been reflected light from the increasingly blinding Spectrometer -

Gordon's eyes would be in a lot of trouble if not for his suit's helmet. He looked away, and cautiously pushed the cart into a waiting slot at the claw-shaped base of the spectrometer. The crystal came into contact with the beam, and...

"My God!" Gordon said, as the last vestiges of consciousness slipped away. "It's full of green..."

And full of green it was.

Green.

Green green green.

And, somewhere in it, _o_don Fr_ma_. But, mostly, green.

They eventually coalesced and mixed, but, as Gordon regained consciousness, there was still green. Enough, in fact, to make Gordon prick up his ears for any shouts of "_Avada Kedavra!_". After he judged his surrounding free of evil wizards, he opened his eyes, to find the green replaced by black. After fumbling around, Gordon managed to turn on his suit's flashlight.

His first thought was "sponge." He was in a small cave, and every surface looked uncannily like that of any _Porifera_ you care to name, but, as Gordon found out when he touched it, was hard as a rock.

Gordon found an opening just big enough to squeeze through, and shimmied through it. He heard a quiet moaning and saw a faint, yellowish glow, which turned out to be from another opening. It led to a more spacious enclosure, this one about the size of an elevator, containing a sort of crater-like depression filled with a bluish liquid, and what uncannily resembled a flesh-colored table lamp. Gordon looked at it, and as he did so, noticed that it was... well, breathing. Gordon quickly found another opening, and left, trying to forget the sound of the low moan he had heard in the tiny cave.

This narrow opening led to something different: Some bloody rags, pushed up against a riveted wall. Gordon picked up a thick, white rag, and did a double take - he had pulled out an entire section of the wall, leaving a sickening, gory mass behind. Gordon had quite a strong constitution, but he still cringed and shut his eyes as he swiveled around and kicked the most solid parts of the slurry away.

Thanking the suit once again for insulating him from the smell, Gordon crawled through the narrow hole that was created by the... corpse, let's say. As he got back up on his feet, he noticed most of a head, the unfortunate man's face frozen in an expression that sent shivers down Gordon's spine. He downgraded his mental stability to "end of my rope", and looked around.

A room, a familiar room. it took Gordon until he noticed the control console and huge hanging flashlight, which was precariously swinging due to the walls caving in dangerously owing to huge clumps of the hard spongy stuff. Gordon cautiously crawled up to one corner, and heard a squelch. This body wasn't as mutilated as the last one, though it was badly burnt. As he turned over the charred hunk of meat and metals, he noticed the head. Grotesquely warped, with the eyes

swelled to the sized of Gordon's palm, the jaw crushed, the ears elongated to look like antennae, and the body emaciated. Gordon sighed, looked away, and took a deep breath, trying to collect himself.

And then, with a whining gurgle and a scrape, something hit him in the back of the head.

7. Chapter 7

"Dr. Freeman?" said a voice, as someone shook my head.

My eyes burst open, and I waved my hands like I was swatting flies. Alyx Vance's face filled my view, and she smiled as I grumbled incoherently. "You drifted off for a few minutes, Doctor. You were right - this is an early start."

Raising myself to a sitting position, I scanned my surroundings - a drab, metallic box, big windows, a few hard seats. The Black Mesa transit tram again, which probably explained that dream. I had had it quite a few times in the past decade, which was apparently a sign of PTSD. Dreams weren't normally that vivid, or that coherent - outside of fiction, of course, but, in my judgement, I already have too many prospective mental disorders on my plate without adding paranoia about being a fictional character.

In case you were wondering, that's exactly how the Incident went - the huge sponge, a few hundred meters thick all around, had simply teleported in there, killing most of the science team. The Resonance Cascade, just like its detergent namesake, cleaned out even the toughest stains - but I digress. Dr. Kleiner and Eli Vance were the only ones besides me to get out alive - the former had helped the latter do the whole trapped-mountaineer deal, and Eli still sported one of those cool crowbar-leg things for his trouble.

The entire thing was hushed up (which was pretty easy considering it was all top secret to start with), but when you're at ground zero, a few things slip through the cracks. I had since found out that the spongy rock was from another dimension, one that Black Mesa's brass had known about for a while. The experiment with the Spectrometer was also attempting to reach that dimension, or maybe they were trying to make it easier to reach than it already was- it was hard to tell from my sources. Now, of course, they had dozens of extradimensional organisms for study, and security had been doubled up for Black Mesa's biological research labs.

I had always thought of that day as my own little first contact - I would have preferred more Close Encounters and less Mars Attacks, but I'd take what I could get. Gordon Freeman: Ph.D, P.I., interdimensional emissary. I must have gone back and forth a dozen times over whether I should have put it on the business card.

I noticed Vance repeatedly checking something in her pocket, going back to it every couple of minutes, to check if it was still there. I decided to talk to her about it, on general principles - I still had, at the back of my mind, some suspicion about her. Look at me, accusing a teenaged girl of swinging a deal to activate a world-shattering laser. I should stop getting so distracted - I had already fallen asleep once, and I wanted my mind in top form for the

experiment - we were due at nine sharp, and it was already 8:47, according to the PA system.

Bringing myself back to the real world, I noticed the Sector C entrance coming up, and indicated it to her. "This is our stop?" I nodded. "Great! Lead the way, Doctor!"

The facility had definitely modernized. Gone were the usual security guard and eye scanner at every door. Vance and I were the only people there, and I passed the security checkpoints with a swipe of a visitor's card I had gotten from Dr. Kleiner.

Seeing my old workplace after a decade was jarring, to say the least: the familiar cool green walls had been replaced with a different but not unpleasant blue. Corridors that had been cramped by open wiring and pipes were now spacious and varnished. The walls of the labs had been replaced with glass, and the lights had been turned up. The whole effect wasn't exactly bad, it just wasn't the Black Mesa I remembered. But, in these times, it was the only Black Mesa there was.

I walked down the hall in my old science uniform, now about a size too big on me, and cut noticeably differently from the one the rest of the staff were wearing - so much for blending in. Alyx Vance was staring everywhere and nearly yanking off my arm as she held on to it. I had to prise her fingers off me when she started cutting off the circulation, and gave her a look before heading to the test chamber.

The three-story ride down was interminable - the test lab was much farther down than I remembered. I had started perspiring when Alyx squirmed, and took off her jacket. "Could you...take this?" She muttered. I did so, noting how small it was - and how it concealed a largish manila envelope, presumably whatever she had been fiddling with earlier. After I briefly considered opening it, I put it and the jacket into the spacious pocket of my lab coat, and we continued our slow descent in silence.

A few seconds later, Alyx Vance awkwardly broke that silence. "Doctor...Gordon...We haven't really known each other very long, but... I know you didn't really have to do this." She hugged me tightly - and that girl does not know her own strength, I can tell you. "Thanks for taking the case."

Catching my breath, I nodded and took her hand, as we went to the security doors. Here, at least, there was a security guard - behind a swanky desk, no less. I showed him my visitor's card, making a she's-with-me gesture in the general direction of Alyx.

"Go right in, hombre," The guard muttered in an eye-rolling accent, pressing a button to open the door.

I came into the test lab's control room, and saw a sort of seismographic display, above a clock reading 9:02 - I had gotten there too late. The window into the test chamber showed the same sweeping orange-colored room I remembered, motionless except for a lone, hazard-suited figure, who was indistinctly talking to another scientist, at the control console.

"All right, Dr. sample should be delivered momentarily," the

scientist said into a microphone gruffly. He didn't get any farther, though, because I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Gordon Freeman!?" He gasped, surprised. I nodded, and made a quick time-out gesture that he ignored. "You're late, Dr. Freeman. Don't disturb the analysis procedure - this is delicate work." He swatted me away, and went back to staring at the many readouts, occasionally pushing a button.

I bit my lip and motioned to Alyx to stay where she was and shut up. I went into the back door of the control room, and searched among the quietly whining banks of computers there. It didn't take long before I found what I was looking for - a small alcove, with a monitor, keyboard, and chair. Oh, yes, and also Dr. Kleiner as well - that was probably important.

When I made my presence known, he wasn't his usual daffy self - in fact, he was close to anger. "Gordon! Where the devil have you been? I've had to program the Spectrometer without your input - all you can do is aid in the analysis, and..." His voice was drowned out. The many towers around us had started making that sort of air-horn noise overclocked computers make - which, when you're in the middle of a herd of wild Dells, can reach deafening levels.

There was another noise there too, though, and after a while, I was able to make it out over both the computers and Dr. Kleiner's desperate shouting. It was the low whistle of the Anti-Mass Spectrometer, powering up. The sound triggered something deep in me - my heart started beating faster. This was it, right here, right now.

I motioned Kleiner to stop wasting his breath, and went to the computer display - I had to ask him how to stop the test, which seemed to be the only way to prevent all hell breaking loose at this point.

```
_how do i stop this  
>asap[<em>
```

Kleiner read it, and tapped out a response.

```
_vontrol room manual overrride  
>big red buttom<em>
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I smiled at him, nodding and patting him on the back. I ran through the labyrinthine room of computers, trying to shake the ringing from my ears - the noise around me was getting louder. Everything was happening all over again, except this time I could stop it, right here and right now. Gordon Freeman, waaa-aaa-aah, savior of the universe. I savored the moment as I opened the door to the control room.

Alyx Vance was at the console, pressing buttons and flipping switches like mad. A scientist was slumped over in the corner, moaning quietly. I rushed over to the window - the huge machine was a blur, spinning so fast it had caused some warning lights. I tried to reach for the only big red button on the board (clearly labeled and visible; thank you, OSHA), and the girl grabbed my arm, jabbing it back in my face with seemingly no exertion whatsoever. She went back to her almost robotic task, not even acknowledging that I had been

there.

I had to think fast - Alyx: a) needed to be stopped right now, b) was in some sort of trance or something, and c) was behind it all. That last one wasn't nearly as surprising as it should have been, for whatever reason. I mean, I had been vaguely serious in my suspicion of her, but this concrete proof was something different entirely.

Anyway, she couldn't be stopped when she was in this state - if I know my hero-possessed-to-do-evil storylines, the quickest way would be to shock her system. A nice healthy slap across the face wouldn't work, and she'd probably break my neck if I tried to give her a hug.

The Boy Scouts' motto is 'be prepared'. I won't pretend to be anywhere near that level, but they are words to live by. As such, the many pockets of my trusty overcoat are filled with various odds and ends...

I grumbled, looking down at my pristine, white lab coat. All I was carrying was a couple of pencils and the girl's bundled leather jacket, which protected that manila envelope she had been fixated on. Figuring that even though I wasn't playing some huge real-life game of Clue, it might have some pertinent information, I slid it open.

Drawings. Sketches. Scribbles. They looked like copies of each other, but each was subtly different. The subject matter was always the same, though: A man.

A tall, thin, besuited man. All in varying states of completeness, detail and size, but each unmistakably drawn by my hand. Fireworks went off in my mind - I remembered everything, crystally clear. He had been, there, ten years ago. He was still there, even now, manipulating, controlling...

Gagging. He had prevented me from talking, literally. No one had noticed, including me - which meant that the way forward was easy.

"Alyx." My voice was hoarse, and I went into a coughing fit afterward, but I got the point across.

"Dr. Freeman? You...you..." Alyx had finally noticed me, and had turned around.

"Who is this, Alyx?" I went to her, holding up a sheaf of drawings. "Do you know who this is?"

She was largely unresponsive, and shaking. "You..."

"Me." I said, and slammed my hand down on the override button.

8. Chapter 8

Everything - not just me, but the world itself - sort of seized up, went a dull gray. The faces of the people around me stopped, and then ebbed into a sort of dark stream of light. A face appeared, the same

one from the drawings - way too close to me, but this was just another illusion. Then the face spoke.

"**Hello again, Mr. Freeman**." I was expecting it, but I still flinched - he was speaking right in my ear, yet from all directions at once. Talk about surround sound.

Then the face vanished, as the world streamed and started to resolve. I blinked - I was in my office.

Wait, forget that, was I really?

I tilted my head, and it was a strange sensation - like when one of those weird magic-eye patterns resolves into a clear image, but more so. This was all a fake - everything looked perfectly like my office, down to the last detail, but it was a facade, an illusion. If you're familiar with a place as I was with my office, you can notice if something is even the slightest bit off - but this was more intense, every instinct telling me that this wasn't real.

I reached out my arm, to touch the nearest surface. There was nothing there - I felt my finger touch the wall, but my arm was, somehow, invisible. I waved my hand in front of my face - a slight breeze, but nothing I could see.

"I believe you wanted to see me, Investigator?" My chair swiveled around - the man in the suit was sitting in it. **"Sit down. I do apologize for your... incorporation, mmn? A necessary matter, you'll find, under the...circumstances."** He spoke as strangely as he moved, the words halting and incorrectly stressed, his motions jerky and slow, as if he was carefully considering each minor movement before he made it.

I sighed - he was shaping up to be one of those enigmatic benefactor types. Honestly, see one vaguely inhuman guy with powers from beyond the pale, a host of plans and covert machinations, and a need for total secrecy, seen 'em all. I was going to have to be direct.

"Cut to the chase, three-piece. How much of 'who you are' are you willing to tell me?"

"Ah, yes. At the moment, Doctor, I feel this conversation would be more... worthwhile if directed towards...yourself, mmn?"

I grumbled. "Have it your way. Weaselly so-and-so. What am I doing here? That better?"

"Acceptable, yes. I do admire your...hubris, Mr. Freeman - a word which first meant 'to challenge the gods', did you know?" I shook my head, and he continued. **"You are here for a greater purpose than you may realize. Ten years ago, an...Incident, mmn? - occurred, during which you considered yourself an...emissary of your race. Now, you are...reprising that role, and-"**

I cut him off. "Oh, come on. Are you putting humanity on trial for its crimes? That is just..." I trailed off, looking at the man expectantly.

He looked quizzically at me for a few seconds, but then smiled. I've seen more inviting expressions from rattlesnakes. **"Ah, I see. That

is... one way to view it, Dr. Freeman. Would it put you at ease, if-"** There was a flash of light, and the man was dressed in a certain futuristic, red-and-black, decidedly copyright-protected uniform, with his voice changed to match. _"-we continued in this manner? It's all the same to me, you understand."_ He put his feet up on the desk, and chuckled.

I stifled a laugh. "No. It can't be. There's no way in hell you're really..."

>"No, no I am not, and I never claimed to be. My apologies, if it...confused you." Another, identical flash, and he was sitting normally, back in his suit. **"And, to move on to similar matters, I apologize for my...intrusion, mmn? On the deepest level of your...privacy."**

I had to think about this for a while before I realized what he was talking about. "So, it was you. You...made it so I couldn't talk. How did you do that? And why?"

"Ah, here we are again. First of all, Investigator, I must explain that this compulsion is the...reason you are here. It was...rendered inoperable...at the moment you became aware of its existence. You are here because I feel I should impress upon you your continued need to, ah...keep quiet.

"You and I, Mr. Freeman, are rather more...alike than you may believe. You are a -" I had to laugh here. "No, no no no. 'We're not so different, you and I?' You're seriously taking that route? I'm not going to rule the world by your side, in case you're wondering. Don't go barking up that tree." At this, the man sighed, and moved a hand to his forehead. **"This is twice, Mr. Freeman, that you have interrupted me. To be honest, my patience is wearing thin - and our...time here is short."**

I was silent. **"Thank you. Now, as I was saying, you consider yourself a..consultant, mmn? Servicing the will of your employer, independently, and performing work that is best...acclimated to your talents. In this respect, I am...nearly identical.**

"In the specifics, however, is when our...professions begin to diverge. I service rather more...illustrious parties than the odd scientist or security officer, and to perform correspondingly greater tasks. I am currently...on the case, you might say, for one of my more...temperamental contacts. They demand the strictest secrecy, and thus, even the fragments of my...previous attempt that you had seen required my personal intervention."

I stopped while I let this sink in. I was beginning to fill in the blanks. "You said 'your previous attempt'?" When? What do I know?" The man stared into space for a while before he responded. **"Surely you haven't forgotten, Doctor? Ten years ago, very near here..."**

"The Resonance Cascade - that was you?"

"Of course not - every single...step in the process was independent, and, even under the closest scrutiny, it would be impossible to connect certain...pivotal components of the conditions involved to a single controlling...force, mmn?"

I nodded.

***"Quite so. It may surprise you to know, Mr. Freeman, that I harbor a deep respect for life, in all its...diverse forms. My current employers, however, are nowhere near as...upright. They agreed with me to spare your life after you so sabotaged the...first attempt at fulfilling their contract, but on the condition that it be impossible to do so a second time."**

I thought back to the test chamber, just before I had been drawn here. "So, because I couldn't talk, I couldn't have stopped another Resonance Cascade?"

***"So my employers understand, Doctor. And it appears they were...absolutely correct, mmn?"**

"Right, right...so? What does that mean?"

***"To my employers, Investigator, it means that I have underestimated you. I was... careless, and messy - leaving just enough...information to allow you to deduce your position, and my role in it."**

I mulled over whether or not to admit to him that I still had no idea about that - before just now I had assumed he was just a red herring from Alyx Vance.

Then, as if he had been following along with my train of thought, the man spoke. ***"Did you, Mr. Freeman? Well...now. You appear to hold Miss...Vance in a higher esteem than she deserves. She is...resourceful, and intelligent, but nothing more than a child, as I am constantly reminded."**

This was probably important, but I fixed on the fact that he was reading my mind. _Hey!_, I thought, as loud as I could imagine. _You said you were sorry for messing with my head, now knock it off!_ In response, his voice came to me telepathically, as if from all directions at once:

***_I apologized, I never said I would stop. If you had been paying attention to me, you would realize that I would have kept your mouth shut if I could have._** He paused, and though he wasn't mind-speaking, or whatever you want to call it (talking about telepathy is hard, by its nature), I could tell he was daring me to give a sarcastic retort. I denied him the privilege.

***_I will spell it out for you, if you insist: If you were the proverbial spanner in the works, Alyx Vance was the grease. She was my proxy, my enforcer, my pawn - and without her knowledge of it, too. She was the one who put this all in motion, and best of all, no one would suspect the girl - no one but you._**

***_You, Dr. Gordon Freeman, Ph.D, P.I., were the linchpin of my plan, not to cause the cataclysm, but to prevent it. You would never have known about this matter had Alyx Vance not contacted you. You would never have contacted your colleagues had she not suggested it. And you would never have suspected her, had she not broken into your house. I was not entirely sure you had begun to view her as a player in the game before that, but afterwards you definitely suspected her, and - because of the blunt instrument of those dreams and those drawings - myself._**

What you need to understand is that you and I are not here, as far as my employers know. To them, you have thwarted my nefarious plots once again, and I will be sure to get you next time.

Incidentally, you seem like an authority on such matters - should I actually fall down into a dark, bottomless chasm as I inform them of this?

I opened my eyes, and looked at him - he was on the verge of genuine laughter.

"Only if they'll get it - no sense wasting a good cliché."

He laughed, and it was a stirring experience. It would have probably sent Lovecraft off to write knock-knock jokes, to be honest. But I had seen some of the man's true nature when he had occupied my mind in plain sight - he was being straight with me. He was a good man saddled with a dirty job, one that he took pride in.

Projecting? Moi? Whatever, he was all right. There was still something I wanted to ask him, though, and I was a bit apprehensive as to his reply.

"So, what happens to me now? Mister Respect-for-all-life?"

"Something...drastic, I'm sorry to say. You will live, make no mistake. You will not, however, continue to...exist, in the way you are used to. I will have to...cut you out of the picture, as it were. You will be...contacted, and actualized, if and when your...time comes round again."

"So what happens to me? I become a ghost? Have some sort of weird half-life?"

The man winced and growled before he answered, for whatever reason.

"For the time being, I...suppose. You will return to your customary state...imminently, I should think."

"When?" I asked weakly, slumping back in my seat.

"When I am done."

I won't deny I was scared - I guess I had always been at the man's mercy, but knowing it made it worse. I tried to appeal to him on my own terms, which he seemed to enjoy.

"This was a mystery! Everyone knows that a mystery ends when the detective gathers all the suspects in the sitting-room and explains it all! You can't end a mystery without that!"

**"Are you so sure I have not, Doctor? May I remind you where we are, and why you were brought here?" **

He stared at me, got up from his chair (my chair, really), opened the door to my ghostly gray office, and everything went white.

"Now, if you'll excuse me...this is where I get off."

There was, once again, darkness. In fact, all my senses were drawing a collective blank - like those water tanks that were popular a while back -as I recall, the effect was supposed to make you think clearer. Clear thinking probably wasn't much of a help in what I'm willing to bet was the ironic hell solipsists go to, but it couldn't hurt.

Here I was, the only thing in the universe, trapped in my own little world, and not able to do anything about it.

But I would think of something.

End
file.